

Why are races won and lost before the start?

As I've said many times throughout this series, the BIGGEST secret to swimming your best when it counts the most is having the ability to stay loose and calm behind the blocks, right before your race. Far too many swimmers waste precious energy the minutes leading up to their event by thinking about and focusing on all of the wrong things. Because of this, they unknowingly undermine their confidence, get themselves overly nervous and set themselves up for failure.

The Devastating Effects Of Out Of Control Pre-Race Jitters

Ever wonder how you can run out of gas at the 150 mark of your 200, the very first race of your big meet? You've worked hard all season, you've got a solid training base, yet your arms and legs feel like lead and you're totally exhausted! What gives? You go 7 – 8,000 yards easily in practice and after a mere 150 you're wasted?! This is a direct result of a swimmer being far too nervous pre-race! If you're “over-amped” behind the blocks and thinking about the time you need, who you have to beat or, “what if you don't?,” then your breathing will get faster and shallower, your muscles will tighten up and the end result of these physical changes will be this feeling of premature exhaustion.

Controlling Your Eyes & Ears To Stay Calm Under Pressure

If you want to consistently swim to your potential under big meet pressure and avoid the devastating physical effects of excessive nerves, then you have to learn how to keep yourself physically and mentally composed at race time! One important way that you do this is by controlling your eyes and ears behind the blocks. This means that what you LOOK AT and LISTEN TO behind the blocks has to be only things that help keep you calm, loose and confident. For example, if focusing on another swimmer and how big or fast they look gets you nervous, you control your eyes by looking at spot behind the blocks or by defocusing your eyes as you look out across the pool. If listening to a conversation between one or more swimmers is getting you anxious, you control your ears by turning up the volume on your iPod or finding someone else to talk to about non-swimming related issues. Controlling your eyes and ears means that you need to establish set things that you look at and listen to right before your races.

How do you control your pre-race focus?

Every great athlete has a repeatable, familiar pre-performance ritual that they use leading up to the start of the action which helps them systematically control their eyes and ears. Your pre-race routine and what you do behind the blocks can help you stay in control of your focus and keep you calm during those critical minutes just before the start of your event. Your pre-race routine will give you very specific things for you to look at, listen to and do that will help distract you from the normal, anxiety-producing distractions that every swimmer has to face right before the start.

What You Need To Know To Develop An Effective Pre-Race Routine

There are several key points that you need to keep in mind whenever developing and using a pre-race ritual.

- Keep your ritual **SIMPLE**. The less complicated, the better!
- Make your ritual **CONTROLLABLE**. You should only have things in your ritual that you know you will always be able to control. For example, if your pre-race ritual depends upon looking at certain other people (coach/parent), they might not always be there for you and therefore are out of your control. However, stretching and adjusting your cap and/or goggles a certain way will always be in your control.
- **KEEP** your ritual the **SAME**. You never want to change the steps of your ritual right before the race. Keeping things the same and familiar will help calm you down and keep you loose.
- Build in **VISUAL, AUDITORY** and/or **KINESTHETIC FOCAL POINTS** to your ritual. Be sure that your routine has specific things that you look at (the back of the blocks, your goggles, your feet), listen to, (certain music, sound of your breathing or specific pre-race self-talk) and feel/do, (stretching a certain way, feeling your inhalation and exhalation, adjusting your cap and goggles).
- Do what you're doing **MENTALLY** while you do it **PHYSICALLY**. Rituals are most effective when you keep your mental focus on the steps of the ritual while you go through them. In other words, while you're stretching behind the blocks, your concentration needs to be on the feel of the stretch. Rituals will not help you calm down if, while you go through them, your mind is elsewhere!
- Understand the **SOLE PURPOSE** of any good ritual is to give you specific things to look at and listen to, which will distract you from the distractions. You don't do your pre-race ritual just for good luck. This is **NOT** about superstition. You go through this pre-race routine to calm yourself down, and most important, to help you control your eyes and ears. This means that if, for whatever reason, you have to leave a step out of the ritual, and you can't do what you always do, you understand that you can still perform your best in this upcoming race. The key is that you use whatever steps you do go through to keep yourself focused, loose and calm!